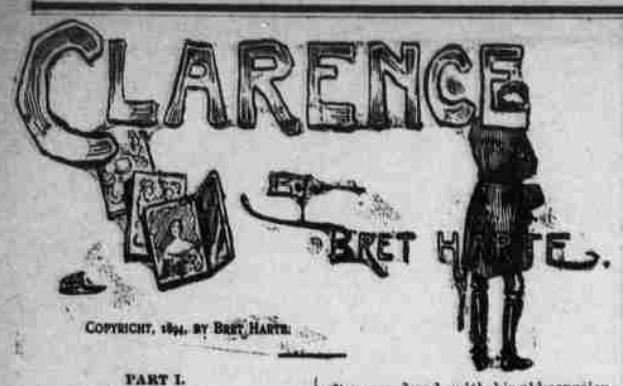
CLARENCE

By BRET HARTE.



PART I.

CHAPTER I.

As Clarence Brant, president of the Robles Land company, and husband of the rich widow of John Peyton, of the Robles ranch, mingled with the outgoing audience of the Cosmopolitan theater at San Francisco, he elicited the usual smiling nods and recognition due to his good looks and good fortune. But as he hurriedly slipped through the still lingering winter's rain into the smart coupe that was awaiting him, and gave the order "home," the word struck him with a peculiarly ironical significance.

His home was a handsome one, and lacked nothing in appointment and comfort, but he had gone to the theater to evade its hollow loneliness. Nor was it because his wife was not there, for he had a miserable consciousness that her temporary absence had nothing to do with his homelessness.

The distraction of the theater over, that dull, vague, but aching sense of loneliness which was daily growing upon him, returned with greater vigor.

He leaned back in the coupe, and gloomily reflected.

He had been married scarcely a year, yet even in the illusions of the honeymoon, the woman, older than himself and the widow of his old patron, had by it unconsciously reasserted herself, and slipped back into the domination of her old position.

It was at first pleasant enough—this half maternal protectorate, which is even apt to mingle with the affections of younger women—and Clarence in his easy half-feminine intuition of the sex, yielded, as the strong are apt to yield, through the very consciousness of their own superiority. But this is a quality the weaker are not apt to recognize, and the woman who has once tasted equal power with her husband, not only does not easily relegate it, but even makes its continuance a test of the affections.

The usual triumphant feminine conclusion: "Then you no longer love me," had in Clarence's brief experience gone even farther and reached its inscrutable climax—"then I no longer love you"—although shown only in a momentary hardening of the eye and voice. And added to this was his sudden but confused remembrance that he had seen that eye and heard that voice in marital altercation during Judge Peyton's life, and that he himself, her boy partisan, had sympathized with her.

Yet, strange to say, this had given him more pain than her occasional other reversions to the past—to her old suspicions of him when he was a youthful protege of her husband's, and a presumed suitor of her adopted daughter Susy.

High natures are more apt to forgive wrong done to themselves than any abstract injustice. And her capricious tyranny over her dependents and servants, or an unreasoning enmity to a neighbor or friend, outraged his finer sense more than her own misconception of himself. Nor did he dream that this was a thing most women seldom understand, or understanding, ever forgive.

The coupe rattled over the stones or swirled through the muddy pools of the main thoroughfares. Newspapers and telegraphic offices were still brilliantly lit, and crowds were gathered among the bulletin boards. He knew that news had arrived from Washington that evening of the first active outbreaks of secession, and that the city was breathless with excitement.

Had he not just come from the theater where certain insignificant allusions in the play had been suddenly caught up and cheered or hissed by hitherto unknown partisans, to the dumb astonishment of a majority of the audience comfortably settled to money-getting and their own affairs alone? Had he not applauded, albeit half scornfully, the pretty actress—his old playmate Susy—who had audaciously and all incongruously waved the American flag in their faces?

Yes! he had known it; had lived for the last few weeks in an atmosphere electrically surcharged with it—and yet it had chiefly affected him in his personal homelessness. For his wife was a southerner, a born slaveholder, and a secessionist, whose noted prejudices to the north had even outrun her late husband's politics.

At first the piquancy and recklessness of her opinionative speech amused him as part of her characteristic flavor, or as a lingering youthfulness, which the maturer intellect always pardons.

He had never taken her politics seriously—why should he? With her head on his shoulder he had listened to her extravagant diatribes against the north; he had forgiven her outrageous indictments of his caste and his associates for the sake of the imperious but handsome lips that uttered them.

But when he was compelled to listen to her words echoed and repeated by her friends and family; when he found that with the clannishness of her race she had drawn closer to them in this controversy—that she depended upon them for her intelligence and information rather than upon him—he had awakened to the reality of his situation. He had borne the allusions of her brother, whose old scorn for his dependent childhood had been embittered by her sister's marriage, and was now scarcely concealed.

Yet while he had never altered his own political faith and social creed in this antagonistic atmosphere, he had often wondered, with his old conscientiousness and characteristic self-abnegation, whether his own political convictions were not merely a revulsion from his domestic tyranny and alien surroundings.

In the midst of this gloomy retrospect the coupe stopped with a jerk before his own house. The door was quickly opened by a servant who appeared to be awaiting him.

"Some one to see you in the library, sir," said the man, "and—" he hesitated and looked toward the coupe.

"Well," said Clarence, impatiently.

"He said, sir, as how you were not to send away the carriage."

"Indeed, and who is it?" demanded Clarence sharply.

"Mr. Hooker. He said I was to say Jim Hooker."

The momentary annoyance in Clarence's face changed to a look of reflective curiosity.

"He said he knew you were at the theater, and he would wait until you came home," continued the man, dubiously watching his master's face. "He don't know you've come in, sir—and—and I can easily get rid of him."

"No matter now. I'll see him—and," added Clarence with a faint smile, "let the carriage wait."

Yet as he turned toward the library he was by no means certain that an interview with the old associate of his boyhood under Judge Peyton's guardianship would divert his mind. Yet he let no trace of his doubts nor of his past gloom show in his face as he entered the room.

Mr. Hooker was apparently examining the elegant furniture and luxurious accommodations with his usual resentful enviousness. Clarence had got a "soft thing." That it was more or less the result of his "artfulness," and that he was unduly "puffed up" by it, were in Hooker's characteristic reasoning equally clear.

As his host smilingly advanced with outstretched hand, Mr. Hooker's efforts to assume a proper abstraction of manner and contemptuous indifference to Clarence's surroundings, which should wound his vanity, ended in his lolling back at full length in the chair with his eyes on the ceiling. But, remembering suddenly that he was really the bearer of a message to Clarence, it struck him that his supine position was, from a theatrical view point, infelicitous.

In his experience of the stage he had never delivered a message in that way. He rose awkwardly to his feet.

"It was so good of you to wait," said Clarence courteously.

"Saw you in the theater," said Hooker, brusquely. "Third row in parquet. Susy said it was you and had suthin' to say to you. Suthin' you ought to know," he continued, with a slight return of his old mystery of manner, which Clarence so well remembered. "You saw her—she fetched the house with that flag business, eh? She knows which way the cat is goin' to jump—you bet. I tell you, for all the blowing of these secessionists, the union's goin' to pay! Yes, sir!" He stopped, glanced around the handsome room and added, darkly: "Mebbe better than this."

With the memory of Hooker's characteristic fondness for mystery still in his mind, Clarence overlooked the innuendo, and said, smiling:

"Why didn't you bring Mrs. Hooker here? I should have been honored with her company."

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly at this seeming levity. "Never goes out after a performance. Nervous exhaustion. Left her at our rooms in Market street. We can drive there in ten minutes. That's why I asked the carriage to wait."

Clarence hesitated. Without caring in the least to renew the acquaintance of his old playmate and sweetheart, a meeting that night in some vague way suggested to him a providential diversion. Nor was he deceived by any gravity in the message; with his remembrance of Susy's theatrical tendencies, he was quite prepared for any capricious futile extravagance.

"You are sure we will not disturb her?" he said, politely.

"No."

Clarence led the way to the carriage. If Mr. Hooker expected him during the journey to try to divine the purport of Susy's message he was disappointed. His companion did not allude to it, possibly looking upon it as a combined theatrical performance. Clarence preferred to wait for Susy as the better actor.

The carriage rolled rapidly through the now deserted streets and, at last, under the directions of Mr. Hooker, who was leaning half out of the window, it drew up at a middle-class restaurant, on whose still lit and steaming windows were some ostentatiously public apartments, accessible from a side entrance.

As they ascended the staircase together it became evident that Mr. Hooker was scarcely more at his ease in the character of host than he had been as guest.

He stared gloomily at a descending visitor, grunted audibly at a waiter in the passage, and stopped before a door where a recently deposited tray displayed the half-eaten carcass of a fowl, an empty champagne bottle, two half-filled glasses and a faded bouquet. The whole passage was redolent with a singular blending of damp cooking, stale cigarette smoke and patchouli.

Putting the tray aside with his foot, Mr. Hooker opened the door hesitatingly and peered into the room, muttered a few indistinct words, which were followed by a rapid rustling of skirts, and then, with his hand still on the door-knob, turning to Clarence, who had discreetly halted on the threshold, flung the door open theatrically and bade him enter.

"She is somewhere in the suite," he added, with a large wave of the hand towards a door that was still oscillating. "He here in a minit."

Clarence took in the apartment with a quick glance. Its furniture had the frayed and discolored splendors of a public parlor which had been privately used and maltreated; there were stains in the large medallioned carpet, the gilded veneer had been chipped from a heavy center table, showing the rough, white deal beneath, which gave it the appearance of a stage "property," the walls paneled with gilt-framed mirrors reflected every domestic detail of private relaxation with shameless publicity.

A damp waterproof shawl and open newspaper were lying across the once brilliant sofa; a powder puff, a plate of fruit and a play book were on the center table, and at the marble topped sideboard was Mrs. Hooker's second-best hat, with a soiled collar, evidently but lately exchanged for the one he had on, peeping over its brim.

The whole apartment seemed to mingle the furtive disclosures of the dressing-room with the open ostentations of the stage, with even a slight suggestion of the auditorium in a few scattered programmes on the floor and chairs.

The inner door opened again with a slight theatrical start, and Susy in an elaborate dressing gown moved languidly into the room.

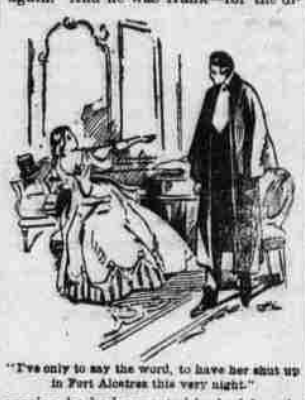
She apparently had not had time to change her underskirt, for there was the dust of the stage on its delicate lace edging as she threw herself into an armchair and crossed her pretty slippered feet before her.

Her face was pale, its pallor incautiously increased by powder, and as Clarence looked at its still youthful, charming outline he was not perhaps sorry that the exquisite pink and white skin beneath, which he had once kissed, was hidden from that awakened recollection.

Yet there was little trace of the girlish Susy in the pretty but prematurely jaded actress before him, and he felt momentarily relieved. It was her youth and freshness appealing to his own youth and imagination that he had loved—not her.

Yet as she greeted him with a slight exaggeration of glance, voice and manner, he remembered that even as a girl she was an actress.

Nothing of this, however, was in his voice and manner as he gently thanked her for the opportunity of meeting her again. And he was frank—for the di-



"I've only to say the word, to have her shut up in Fort Alcatraz this very night."

version he had expected he had found; he even was conscious of thinking more kindly of his wife who had supplanted her.

"I told Jim he must fetch you, if he had to carry you," she said, striking the palm of her hand with her fan, and glancing at her husband; "I reckon he guessed why—though I didn't tell him—I don't tell Jim everything."

Here Jim arose, and, looking at his watch, "guessed he'd run over to the Lick house and get some cigars."

If he was acting upon some hint from his wife his simulation was so badly done that Clarence felt his first sense of uneasiness. But as Hooker closed the door awkwardly and ostentatiously behind him, Clarence smilingly said he had waited to hear the message from her own lips.

"Jim only knows what he's heard outside; the talk of men, you know, and he hears a good deal of that; more, perhaps, than you do. It was that which put me up to finding out the truth. And I didn't rest till I did. I'm not to be fooled, Clarence—you don't mind my calling you Clarence, now we're both married and done for—and I'm not the kind to be fooled by anybody from the low counties—and that's the Robles rancho. I'm a southern woman myself, from Missouri, but I'm for the union first, last and all the time, and I call myself a match for any lazy, dawdling, lash-slinging slaveholders and slaveholderesses—whether they're mixed blood heaven only knows, or what—or their friends or relations—or the dirty half Spanish grandees and their mixed half nigger peons who truckle to them. You bet!"

His blood had stirred quickly at the mention of the Robles rancho, but the rest of Susy's speech was too much in the vein of her old extravagance to touch him seriously.

He found himself only considering how strange it was that the old petulance and impulsiveness of her girlhood was actually bringing back with it her pink cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"You surely didn't ask Jim to bring me here," he said smilingly, "to tell me that Mrs. Peyton"—he corrected himself hastily, as a malicious sparkle came into Susy's blue eyes—"that my wife—who a southern woman, and probably sympathized with her class? Well, I don't know that I should blame her for that any more than she should blame me for being a northern man and an unionist!"

"And she doesn't blame you?" asked Susy, sneeringly.

The color came slightly into Clarence's cheek, but before he could reply the actress added:

"No—she prefers to use you."

"I don't think I understand you," said Clarence, rising coldly.

"No—you don't understand her!" retorted Susy, sharply. "Look here, Clarence Brant, you're right; I didn't ask you here to tell you—what you and everybody knows—that your wife is a southerner. I didn't ask you here to tell you what everybody suspects—that she turns you round her little finger. But I did ask you here to tell you, what nobody, not even you, suspects, but what I know! And that is that she's a traitor—and more, a spy! And that I've only got to say the word—or send that man Jim to say the word—to have her dragged out of her copperhead den at Robles rancho, and shut up in Fort Alcatraz this very night!"

Still with the pink glowing in her rounding cheek, and eyes snapping like splintered sapphires, she rose to her feet, with her pretty shoulders lifted, her small hands and white teeth both tightly clenched, and took a step towards him.

(To be continued.)